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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [KPAO](#) [EG](#)

SUBJECT: EGYPTIAN PRESS SHAKE-UP: MUSICAL CHAIRS OR MEANINGFUL CHANGE?

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1. Summary: Egypt's Shura Council confirmed long-rumored changes to the pro-government press by appointing new editors and board chairmen on July 4. The changes see younger faces rising from the ranks to replace an old guard of editors - some appointed by Anwar Sadat himself - who doubled as board chairmen. While the timing of the appointments surprised PA contacts who expected changes after presidential elections this fall, all believed the changes were necessary to help increase falling circulation rates and stem widely rumored corruption. End summary.

2. Egypt's Shura Council, during its final meeting before summer recess, appointed new leadership for much of the pro-government press on July 4. These changes -- long-rumored in media circles since a controversy over a reprinted May 15 interview that President Mubarak gave to the Kuwaiti newspaper Al-Siyassa (reftel) -- see the exit of the old guard and the entrance of younger faces. The new editors and board chairmen have risen through the ranks of the pro-government press as correspondents and editors, and, therefore, are known-quantities to the Mubarak government. Several appear regularly on Egyptian TV and even pan-Arab satellite channels.

3. Notable changes include:

-- Osama Saraya, a liberal reformer and former Editor of weekly magazine Al Ahram Al Arabi, becomes Editor-in-chief of Al Ahram daily, replacing Ibrahim Nafei. Saraya frequently travels through the region and appears on Al-Jazeera and Al-Arabiya TV promoting reform. PA contacts reported on July 4 that Nafei selected Saraya as his successor in large part because of Saraya's loyalty, allegedly acting as Nafei's "vote collector" when Nafei became head of the Egyptian press syndicate. Saraya is generally well respected among Embassy contacts and is seen as someone with a more modern appreciation of the nuances in international affairs.

-- Mohamed Barakat, previously Editor of weekly magazine Akher Sa'a, becomes Editor-in-chief of daily Al Akhbar, replacing Galal Duweider. Barakat previously worked as a correspondent at the Egyptian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the presidency.

-- Mohamed Ali Ibrahim, former Editor of English-language daily The Egyptian Gazette, becomes editor-in-chief of daily Al-Gomhouriya. Mohammed Ali Ibrahim also served as an editor for Messa, the evening edition of Al-Gomhouriya.

-- Momtaz Al-Qut, former Akhbar Al-Youm Presidential Affairs Editor, replaces Ibrahim Saeda as Editor-in-chief of weekly Akhbar Al-Youm. Al-Qut has excellent relations with the Presidency and the head of the Shura Council, NDP General Secretary Safwat Al-Sharif.

4. In addition to new editors for the big three dailies (Al-Ahram, Al-Akhbar, and Al-Gomhouriya), new board chairmen were also selected. They are:

-- Salah Al-Ghamri, Al-Ahram, replaces Ibrahim Nafei. Al-Ghamri previously worked as the head of distribution for Al-Ahram newspaper.

-- Mohamed Ahdi Fadli, Al-Akhbar (comprising daily Al-Akhbar and weekly Akhbar Al-Youm), replaces Ibrahim Saeda. Fadli served previously as Akhbar Al-Youm's General Manager.

-- Mohamed Abou Hadid, Dar Al-Tahrir, which publishes Al-Gomhouriya, replaces Samir Ragab. Hadid was Managing Editor of Al-Gomhouriya's weekly edition.

5. Other appointments included: Mohamed Al-Qersh to English-language Al-Ahram Weekly; Abdallah Kamal to liberal magazine Rose Al-Youssef; and Abdallah Hassan as Editor-in-chief and Board Chairman for the Middle East News Agency (MENA), a government-owned wire service offering regular news reports to subscribers in Arabic, English, and French.

6. Many PA contacts were surprised by the timing of the Shura Council's announcement. Most observers had anticipated changes would be made after presidential

elections in September, allowing for stable and reliable media coverage during the campaign. However, members of the Egyptian media are encouraged by changes they see as necessary to retain Egypt's position as one of the leaders of the Arab media. All contacts agreed that the old guard's retirement was overdue, with Nafei, Saeda, and Al-Gomhouriya editor-in-chief Samir Ragab being especially singled out for criticism for having lowered their publication's standards and allegedly acquiring their wealth through corrupt use of their positions. Ragab, in particular, was unpopular with Embassy contacts and is widely seen as someone who has based his career on a formula combining corruption and sycophantic praise of the ruling elite.

17. Comment: The new generation of pro-government editors, while benefiting from their previous positions, have acknowledged to PA officers in past meetings the problems the pro-government press faces namely, falling rates of circulation from not competing well with satellite TV and Egypt's independent press, and from the perception that the pro-government press is nothing more than a Mubarak 'mouthpiece.' By appointing younger editors and board chairmen before elections, the Mubarak government could be attempting to reassure the public that as is the case now with many government ministries experienced, younger faces are helping steer the country forward toward reform. At the same time, Mubarak and his government can be privately assured that the new editors are known quantities and 'know the score' of how things are supposed to work in the Egyptian press. End comment.

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